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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KWMN](#) [KDEM](#) [KU](#) [FREEDOM](#) [AGENDA](#)
SUBJECT: FREEDOM AGENDA: WOMEN'S ELECTION PARTICIPATION
BREAKING TABOOS, SHAPING ISSUES, AND CHANGING THE STATUS QUO

REF: KUWAIT 2271 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Matthew H. Tueller
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C/NF) Summary and comment: The participation of women in the June 29 parliamentary elections is having a profound impact on Kuwaiti society. Issues of equality and social import have taken a prominent place in the local media, and candidates have been forced to address issues important to women such as health and education. Candidates have also made special arrangements to allow female candidates to attend their campaign rallies and seminars. The conservative backlash that might be expected from such a major change has been minimal. Some male candidates still do not take women seriously, especially in this first election where it is likely that women will support conservative candidates. The changes that are taking place, however, will irreversibly change Kuwaiti society to give women a greater voice. End summary and comment.

Breaking Social Taboos

12. (SBU/NF) Women's participation, both as voters and candidates, in the June 29 parliamentary elections is having a profound effect on Kuwait and breaking many conservative social taboos in the process. Thousands of women are enthusiastically attending the campaign rallies of both male and female candidates. At many campaign tents in Kuwait City, male and female voters mingle freely; others have partitions or separate tents for female voters, who can watch male candidates address men via closed-circuit television. In more rural, tribal constituencies (reftel), candidates have held separate rallies for female voters since, as one supporter of a tribal candidate told PolOff, it would be impossible for women to mingle with men as they do in urban areas.

13. (SBU/NF) The campaign headquarters of female candidates have been swarmed by supporters not only from their districts but from every area in Kuwait. Candidate Dr. Rola Dashti, a U.S. educated economist, estimated that a mixed crowd of more than 3,000 people attended her opening rally. Exemplifying increasing political activism and the profound social changes underway, a middle-aged man urged his sheepish brother to approach outspoken candidate Aisha Al-Reshaid at her campaign tent. The brother admitted that he had been reticent to visit her tent because of what he had heard about her. But he said seeing her in person gave him a completely different impression and he thanked her for her efforts and wished her the best in the elections. "It is time to change," he said simply. Al-Reshaid told him not to believe everything he heard in the press and, clearly basking in the limelight, winked at PolOffs sitting next to her in triumph of a small

victory won.

Nightlife, Kuwaiti Style

¶4. (C/NF) Women are also participating actively in campaign activities. Male candidates from all political leanings have established "women's committees" to campaign on their behalf with female voters in their district. Some women have even complained about the number of calls they have received from female campaigners. Retired diplomat and GOK critic Mohammed Al-Qadiri told PolOff his home phone has been ringing non-stop with calls for his wife and two of his daughters. He is not receiving any calls because he failed to update his residency information after a move to a new neighborhood. Because women were automatically registered to vote following the change in the voting law, updated contact information for his wife and daughters is available to candidates. Abdul Hussein Al-Sultan, the Secretary General of a Shi'a political association and a campaign advisor to several Shi'a candidates, told PolOff that a 1 AM strategy meeting with one Shi'a candidate was attended by a number of women who joked about their husbands waiting at home for them while they debated campaign strategies and political issues. One liberal candidate even had female campaign workers in short-sleeve shirts directing men and women to available seats as they arrived at his campaign rally.

¶5. (SBU/NF) Political Scientist Dr. Nada Al-Mutawa recounted to EmbOffs that she was at a rally and overheard an elderly woman tell her daughter she was not ready to return home and wanted to visit the campaign tents of other candidates. The tired daughter reluctantly spoke to other women, identified the nearby headquarters of other candidates, and dutifully

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escorted her mother to other tents. Al-Mutawa explained this exchange was not unique. Many older women are enjoying the late night election activities and opportunities to stay out late, something they only do when attending women-only weddings.

The Fatwa's in Your Court

¶6. (C/NF) These developments have not been met with universal approval, particularly among Islamists. The Dean of the Faculty of Sharia at Kuwait University, Dr. Mohammed Al-Tabtabaei, caused considerable controversy when he issued a "fatwa" recently stating that "a divorce claimed by a husband on the grounds that his wife did not vote according to his preference will be valid." The Ministry of Awqaf's Al-Ifta and Islamic Research Sector issued a counter fatwa, which reportedly invalidates Al-Tabtabaei's fatwa, ruling that "no one can force any citizen, either male or female, to vote for any specific candidate." Al-Mutawa claimed the press exaggerated the reaction to the alleged fatwa, but PolChief met with a group of women activists the day of the announcement and they were clearly worried the proclamation would keep Shi'a women away from the polls and encouraged religious scholars to speak out against Al-Tabtabaei.

¶7. (U) In addition, several of Al-Reshaid's campaign posters were vandalized. Four "Islamist activists," whom Al-Reshaid claimed belonged to "an Islamist group opposed to women's political rights," were arrested for vandalizing the posters, the English daily Arab Times reported June 14. Asked about the vandalism, Al-Reshaid shrugged it off with a smile, seemingly relishing the firestorm of criticism she elicits from conservative Islamists. Posters for a few other candidates, including one man, have also been defaced, but the acts have not attracted the attention that the vandalism of Al-Reshaid's has, in part because Al-Reshaid is running in an extremely conservative district against an outspoken former Islamist MP.

18. (C/NF) The participation of women is also shaping the issues and rhetoric of these elections. Local media have devoted extensive coverage to women's participation and candidates' positions on women's issues and political participation. Female voters are asking tough, intelligent questions with a focus on social issues such as education, health care, and discriminatory personal status laws. Several female candidates, like former Assistant Undersecretary of the Ministry of Information for Tourism Nabila Al-Omari and MEPI program alumna Hind Ben Al-Shaikh, are campaigning primarily on these issues. Al-Mutawa and Dr. Samar Al-Roumi, a professor and columnist, explained that not only are women deeply interested in the issues, but because women traditionally do not attend diwanis and regularly interact with the male candidates, they view the campaign tents as their one and only opportunity to ask tough questions, dismissing the deferential treatment usually given to former MPs. A highly-placed advisor to one male candidate concurred, saying that women were more issues-oriented than men, since they had fewer personal connections to the candidates. Women are also calling to task many Islamist candidates running for re-election for voting against women's suffrage legislation in 2005, a trend encouraged by liberal candidates and women's activists who advocate not voting for anyone who voted against women's suffrage.

19. (C/NF) Many political activists and liberal politicians are encouraging women to exercise their newly-acquired political rights. In a women's diwaniya he hosted in February, Ali Al-Rashid, a liberal MP who headed the recently-dissolved Parliament's Human Rights Defense Committee and tried in vain to get Oprah Winfrey to attend a conference he organized, urged women not only to vote, but to bring up the issues they care about and to force parliamentary candidates to address these issues. He went beyond the normal rhetoric of campaigners who talk about women's votes having an effect on "women's" issues such as health, education, and personal status laws, saying women could be the engine for reform in Kuwaiti society as a whole.

Get Out the Vote

10. (SBU/NF) Focusing on the broader reform issue and the potential impact of women on the political scene, several

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candidates are concurrently involved in voter education and awareness programs. Candidate Al-Anjari told PolOff that she intends to launch o/a June 20 a women's electoral empowerment campaign through the media. She proudly pointed to a purple ribbon on her lapel which she said symbolized her "Women of Kuwait Are Gonna Vote" campaign. This campaign, separate from her own electoral bid, is designed to spur women to vote and thereby confirm their importance to the political system.

For example, the campaign will encourage women who live in districts where there is no candidate they support to go to the polls and file empty ballots. Likewise, with general guidance and encouragement from the MEPI-funded National Democratic Institute, the Women's Social and Cultural Society (WSCS) is launching a voter education campaign using print and broadcast media and advertisements on the back of buses. The message chosen by the Society depicts a partial view of a young woman with a piece of tape across her mouth and the tag line, "For your voice to rise, use your right." UNDP contributed to the campaign and WSCS secured free air time from local TV and radio stations. Additionally, the owner of 74 plasma TVs located in 15 malls agreed to run for free the public service announcements every 20 minutes throughout for a total of 27,972 airings during the campaign period. (Note: Septel will address the role of MEPI-funded programs in the parliamentary elections. End note.)

¶11. (U) Other local businesses have also stepped forward in support of women's rights. The newly established Jazeera Airlines, Kuwait's first private airline, announced it would offer free flights to Kuwaiti women who wanted to come to Kuwait to vote in the June 29 elections. CEO Marwan Boodai told the press, "We want to ensure that as many women as possible have the available access to return to Kuwait to vote in these historic elections as part of Jazeera Airways' national social responsibility program." He also extended the free invitation to "women of every nationality to fly Jazeera Airways to Kuwait and observe the historic elections." Jazeera flies to Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Bahrain, and Dubai. In addition, candidates in some districts are reportedly offering to provide transportation to polling stations to women who want to vote.

¶12. (U) While most members of the ruling family have shied away from comments on the elections, poet Dr. Maymouna Al-Sabah has attended the rallies of several female candidates and penned an op-ed encouraging women to vote noting, "...their mere participation in this election is a victory to all women in Kuwait." Other Al-Sabah women lamented to PolChief that members of the ruling family do not vote, commenting they would be proud to join their sisters at the polls.

A Slow Process

¶13. (C/NF) In this conservative, male-dominated society, the significance of these changes should not be underestimated. Nonetheless, there is still a long way to go. Most contacts agree that the majority of women will vote on the advice of their male relatives. Supporting this view, 76% of those responding to a recent poll conducted by the private television channel Al-Rai said they believed "men have an influence on a woman's vote." Even a liberal contact told PolOff his sister asked him recently, "Who are we voting for?" There are a number of reasons why women are likely to rely on their male relatives' advice when voting: conservative social values, lack of information about the issues and candidates, and a tendency for families to vote as a bloc. It is also unlikely that a female candidate will be elected due to the short campaign period and the fact that female candidates are not known personally to most voters, whereas many male candidates have spent years visiting diwanis and developing a strong base of support.

¶14. (C/NF) For these reasons, some candidates downplay the significance of women's participation in these elections. One tribal candidate told PolOff he was relying on men to reach female voters. Jamal Al-Omar, a pro-Government candidate running for re-election, told PolOff he had held a separate meeting for women, but was unable to cite any specifics as to how his message to them had differed from his message to male voters. Instead, he said somewhat patronizingly that he explained the history and process of voting to the women. Several other male candidates or their campaign managers have been similarly unable to explain why they believe women will vote for them, suggesting some candidates do not view female voters as a unique constituency with unique concerns. It will be interesting to see if in four years candidates can be as dismissive of women's

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concerns when they have to defend their record in the National Assembly on issues important to women.

¶15. (C/NF) It is also likely that women's participation in these elections will benefit Islamist candidates. Islamists are well organized and well funded, and have a strong conservative base whose female members are expected to vote for male Islamist candidates. In addition, women in conservative families are more likely to follow the lead of their male relatives when voting than those from more liberal

backgrounds. Women's participation is also likely to have only a marginal impact in tribal constituencies, where only male members of the tribe are allowed to participate in primaries to choose candidates to represent the tribe in the elections. Since primaries are illegal in Kuwait -- a law seldom enforced by the Government -- there are no regulations requiring tribes to allow female members to participate in the primaries. Both the men and women from the tribe are expected to vote for the candidates chosen in these primaries, one tribal supporter told PolOffs. Thus, female voter turnout is likely to be high in tribal areas, but their vote will almost certainly be pre-determined.

A Lasting Impact

¶16. (C/NF) Despite these concerns, women's participation in these elections is making a significant difference and is laying the groundwork for women's full integration into Kuwait's political system. In addition to the short-term impact on these elections, women's participation is likely to have a significant long-term impact, particularly in shaping legislative priorities over the next four years and in enhancing the standing and legitimacy of the National Assembly. Now that more than half of the electorate is female, MPs are likely to focus more on issues of social equality than in previous Parliaments. Ironically, the failure of female candidates could also lead to the adoption of a quota system, in which a specific number of seats in Parliament are allocated to women, as has been proposed by some activists. Women's participation is also likely to lead to a gradual shift in social attitudes, as women's attendance at traditionally male-only diwanis and other gatherings where politics are discussed becomes more acceptable. One woman told PolChief that she is now discussing politics with her husband for the first time and he sought her opinions on the credentials of both the male and female candidates. Such changes, which will not be measurable in the results of June 29 elections, may prove to have the biggest effect on women's issues in Kuwait. Finally, there is still a possibility that the new Parliament will vote to reduce the number of electoral districts in Kuwait. This would give women a further boost since redistricting will enhance the role of emerging political parties and force candidates to rely more on political platforms and less on the leverage of personal and family connections.

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